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ABSTRACT

The experiment of a "conceptual" middle school raised the possibility of separating the program from the building. The school district in which this innovation has been carried out consists of five elementary schools and one comprehensive high school which service a 400 square mile area. The district includes nine separate towns in western Massachusetts, isolated by steep Appalachian hills and narrow valleys. It is an area of severe winter weather and has a long history of intense local pride, inter-town rivalry, and poverty. Students leaving elementary school and entering high school were facing difficulties in adjusting to a strange new, sometimes rough environment, resulting in poor academic performance and misbehavior. A middle school program was developed that made use of a wing of the regional high school as well as some classrooms in each of the five elementary schools. It was conceived of as a network or bridge linking the six schools by means of a middle school program without an individual building. It was demonstrated to the elementary schools that their graduates were being warmly received, and to the high school that, with increasingly limited resources, students could be better prepared to make intelligent elective choices on entering the ninth grade, and were more able to handle specialized instruction. (JD)

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A "CONCEPTUAL" MIDDLE SCHOOL

FREEING THE PROGRAM FROM THE BUILDING

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A CONCEPTUAL MIDDLE SCHOOL: FREEING THE PROGRAM FROM THE BUILDING

In an expression like "middle school" the term "school" is ambiguous in that it refers both to a program of education and a location or building in which the program is conducted. More often than not, since programs change faster than buildings, there is a certain gap between the way we would like to conduct our teaching and what the structure allows or requires. Although it occasionally happens that the physical setting awakens us to possibilities to improve instruction which we had not thought of, we usually struggle against the way buildings force our activity into formal and conventional patterns. The rectilinear arrangement of rooms and passageways is recognized by students and teachers alike as "boring". Yet when the idea of a new middle school is contemplated, it is taken for granted that the new school must begin with a new building and all its built-in limitations. I suggest, however, that we think of the middle school as a program, if not without a building, at least in a variety of physical settings.

An Experimental Program

The experiment of a "conceptual" middle school in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts beginning in 1979 raised the possibility of separating the program from the building. Mohawk Trail Regional School District is a group of five K-6 elementary schools and one 7-12 comprehensive high school serving a 400 square mile area. The district includes nine separate towns in western Massachusetts,

isolated by steep Appalachain hills and narrow valleys. It is an area of severe winter weather and a long history of intense local pride and inter-town rivalry. The economic condition of the area is poor, as indicated by the $4,269 per capita annual income, 6% unemployment and 11.2% "under-employment". There has been a traditional respect for schooling as an avenue of upward mobility. Fierce competition in the athletic program appears to be an expression of the historic rivalry between the communities.

The regional school had come to an alarming point in its seventh and eighth grade program with poor academic performance and excessive acting out behavior on the part of the students. As parents and school personnel saw the problem, students were moving from a relatively protected setting emotionally and academically in the sixth grades to a setting in the seventh grade in which they were crowded in with strangers, had to learn to manage a new level of roughness in physical interaction, and were challenged to produce academically in a way they had not been used to before.

The solution to these problems seemed to be to develop a middle school program that would focus on the emotional and social development of the students. It was unlikely, however, that a separate building to house a middle school would ever be built, partly because the district did not have the money for a new school building, but also because political resistance would be generated by the towns if they were asked to transport their

upper elementery grades to a central location. The solution agreed upon was to develop a middle school program without a building, a "conceptual" middle school that made use of a wing of the regional school as well as some classrooms in each of the five elementary schools. It was conceived of as a network or bridge linking the six schools by means of a middle school program: a program without a building.

Success for the Program

After its third year of operation as an "innovative educational project" under a grant from Title IVC of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the middle school was able to establish itself as a regular part of the district program without outside financial support. The fact that the middle school came as a program and not as a building appears to have made it more viable.

Lacking a building, the middle school had to spend more effort that it would have otherwise in building good relations with the high school and elementary schools. Most middle schools have problems interpreting their programs to grades above and below them in their systems. In a separate building a middle school can disregard the problem, but when space as well as books and materials are shared, with the high school in this case, the problem can not be escaped so easily. It was necessary for the middle school program to invest a considerable amount of time and effort interpreting its aims and methods to elementary and high school teachers and administrators to show that the success

of the middle school actually served the interests of everyone. It could demonstrate to the elementary schools that their graduates were being warmly received, treated respectfully as individuals, and were sending back the message that their younger brothers and sisters could look forward to a good experience in middle school. It could prove to the high school that with increasingly limited resources students could be better prepared to make intelligent elective choices on entering the nineth grade, and were more able to handle specialized instruction. Emphasis on activity oriented instruction and more thoughtful approaches to curricular change helped high school teachers reassess their own practices.

Ironically the middle school program was more viable without a building because it was more vulnerable. Once having succeeded in showing that the program had payed off in terms of student performance and satisfaction, the system could not afford to let the program die. Without a building or a "building principal", the school district had to provide the organizational legitimacy the middle school needed to survive. The district then placed the middle school program under the vice principal of the regional school, with the result that the program has received a degree of administrative protection that it would not ordinarily have had.

Communication a Challenge

Without a doubt, the major problem raised by the lack of a building is how to communicate adequately. Formal communication such as in written notices were handled by inter-school mail and by an efficient telephone network between schools. The regular

newsletter sent to all students, parents, and school staffs was a key source of information. An active parents' group with its own telephone network was a great aid to the program. Regular notices were also placed in the local press. At first regular meetings were held with representatives from each school, a sort of delegated staff meeting, but later a council of principals was formed to serve a more effective decision making role.

Informal communication was more difficult. There is a day to day sharing of support or clarification of misunderstandings that takes place in casual conversation in the halls when people share the same space. This is difficult to sustain without a building. Occasional social gatherings of teachers were held with some success, but in traditional communities the importance of such meetings for the smooth operation of the organization is not generally acknowledged. Such sharing of the enthusiasm for a program well begun is a continuing objective of the program.

Perhaps the principle advantage of being without a building was that it gave the separate towns a chance to identify with the program. A building had to be located somewhere. If it is in your town, it cannot be in mine. If it were centrally located, it would be seen as another insult to those towns that were already periphral is so many other ways. Without a building, however, the claim that the middle school was equally present in all the towns seemed more credible. There were many shared

programs from the state which were already in effect, and gave an understandable precedent for the middle school program. As long as educational materials such as computers and teaching aids could be distributed equally, each town could appreciate ~~their~~ its entitlement by the program and therefore ~~their~~ its ownership of it.

Finally there was a sense of liberation that came with the absence of a building. There was a clear sense among the staff of rising to meet a challenge, partly as a result of starting a new program, but also partly from the need to adapt the new program to all the different buildings in which it would happen. It was this sifting out of the program from a particular building that an excitement arose which set the tone for the whole middle school program, and continues to motivate the students and staff of the "conceptual" middle school.